Writing with Clarity

Turn corporate sludge into focused, compelling writing

Fall | 2012

Power of Words:

- Word selection is important
- Communicate clearly
- Connect with your audience
- Project a positive and motivating message

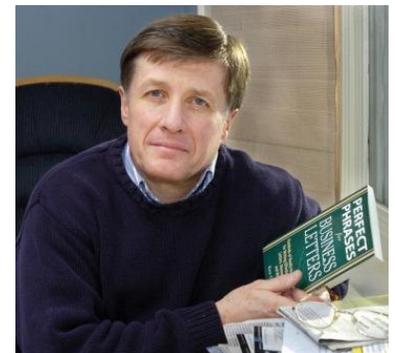### How Language Choices can Make or Break Your Communication

If you saw a memo about a meeting to discuss "optimal cross-functional leveraging," would you rush to put it on your calendar? How would you view an executive who wrote to you, "Are you going to do your job, or am I going to have to find someone else to finish the project?"

Various factors determine the success of a communication, but often, the decisive issue is the writer's choice of words.

We sometimes overlook that a word is more than a string of letters. Words are to writers what tools are to the carpenter. And just as a builder reaches for a hammer, not a wrench, to pound a nail, so too does the writer need to carefully select the appropriate "tools" for her purpose. The right words can distinguish a story or a communication and lift it above the mediocrity that pervades the global workplace, and the wrong words can ruin a message and even damage your credibility.

By Ken O'Quinn
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and Founder of
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Clarity

At the heart of clear communication is immediate understanding. The reader grasps your meaning on one reading, not after several readings and a few emails seeking clarification. So if instant comprehension is the goal, do not make the reader work too hard.

Clarity cont.

Clarity
1. clearness or lucidity as to perception or understanding; freedom from indistinctness or ambiguity
2. the state or quality of being clear or transparent to the eye; pellucidity: the clarity of pure water

"Contrary to what many seem to believe, or want to believe, they do not need to use buzzwords to appear knowledgeable, professional, or visionary. Such words rarely impress anyone."

Abstract words create obstacles for the reader. Anytime a reader looks at a word, the brain goes through a series of steps: It processes each letter, it puts the letters together as a word, it retrieves an image of the word, and it grasps the meaning of the word in the context of other words in the sentence. It does this successfully for words such as *magazine, computer*, or *audience.* But it strains to make sense of *synergies, scalable*, and *shifting paradigms* because those words are neither visual nor familiar, and the brain does not process abstraction easily.

The only way the brain makes sense of such words is by looking at other words in the sentence and deriving a meaning from the context. But who has time to do that? Using corporate buzzwords is counterproductive because they are vague; they do not tell the reader exactly what you mean, so you force the reader to waste time figuring it out. If you saw a brochure for the Human Capital Metrics Conference, would that engaging title make you reach for the phone to register?

Contrary to what many seem to believe, or want to believe, they do not need to use buzzwords to appear knowledgeable, professional, or visionary. Such words rarely impress anyone.

In writing their insightful book *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*, Brian Fugere and his co-authors presented two original writing samples to people in Starbucks stores in Atlanta. One sample contained clear, plain prose; the other was laden with fuzzy words such as *infrastructure*, *mission-critical responsibilities*, and *cross-unit service delivery*. Readers ridiculed the corporate language as "rude" and "obnoxious."

An instructor asked several group of business professionals about the meaning of this sentence: *With nanotechnology the next big thing in the economy*, **nanotech initiatives** *have been launched in 25 states*. Not one person had an answer.

The word *initiatives* can refer to programs, projects, plans, goals, strategies, marketing campaigns, or countless other possibilities. The sentence above referred to companies that opened for business, but it is not the reader's job to find that out. Say what you mean so the reader can process the message, act accordingly, and move on. In the sentence above.

Persuasiveness

To be persuasive, a communicator needs to connect with the audience, and common, familiar words do that because they usually are shorter, more specific, and more concrete. Vivid language helps the audience "see" the ideas and concepts that the persuader is advocating, and they hold the audience's attention throughout the message or speech.

Psychologists Stephen Smith and David Shaffer did a study in which they explained to two groups the dangers of drinking and driving. In one presentation, they simply said that alcohol reduces reaction time, increasing the chances of an accident. To the second group, they said, among other things, that slowed reaction time could result in "bloody, bone-crushing accidents." The second audience retained much more of the presentation than the first group.

"If the arguments in a message are strong and the message contains vivid elements that illustrate the points one is trying to make, then message recipients will be more likely to think about and remember the message arguments" than they would if the arguments were weak or if the images were inconsistent with the theme, the authors wrote in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. "A vivid presentation can create mental images that are easily retrieved," helping the audience to recall the images and the arguments.

One good example of vivid language is the use of analogies, which enable the reader to link the unfamiliar to the familiar. Aristotle, who laid the original foundation for a persuasive argument, said comparisons were vital to persuasion and to storytelling because they provided vivid pictures to the reader. "Metaphor most brings about learning" because pleasure comes from learning easily, he said in his treatise *On Rhetoric*.

One good example of strong imagery was from New York Times writer Rick Bragg, who described an exhausted workaholic as having "the eyes of a basset hound." He did not say the executive looked tired all the time; he did not need to. Instead, he gave the reader an unmistakable image in the metaphor he chose.
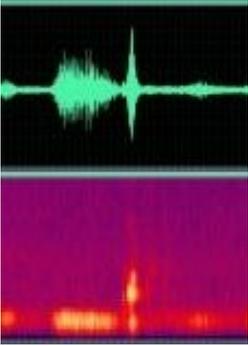
Persuasion
1. convincing, compelling, forceful

"If the arguments in a message are strong and the message contains vivid elements that illustrate the points one is trying to make, then message recipients will be more likely to think about and remember the message arguments."

Tone

Tone
1. to give the proper tone to
2. to take on a particular tone
3. tone down, to become or cause to become softened or moderated
4. tone up, to give a higher or stronger tone to

"Carefully choosing the right words for a proper tone also can help you be more persuasive."

Word choice affects tone, which can determine the success of a message and also can affect the writer's (or speaker's) credibility. A demanding tone might prompt a reader to ignore your request, and an arrogant, condescending tone might leave an audience with an unsavory impression of you. It depends on your words.

A vice president of analyst relations at a Fortune 100 company complained to a researcher at the Gartner Group that the firm was giving the company too little notice before releasing a negative report about the company's performance. With only 24 hours to prepare a response, executives scrambled, and the vice president wanted to persuade Gartner to change its policy. "Senior people here resent the fire drill ... They have day jobs," the vice president sneered in a two-page diatribe. "I don't see a great business reason for your firm to behave this way." She realized later why her message had not had much of an effect.

When conveying negative messages, your purpose is not to unload your anger; it is to bring about a change in behavior, and you do that by inducing the reader or listener to see the merits of your case. The more positive you are, the more likely you are to succeed. Being positive means avoiding such words as *error, careless, failed to, sloppy, lazy, mistake*.

Carefully choosing the right words for a proper tone also can help you be more persuasive. When people read or hear a message intended to persuade them, they sometimes will accept or reject the appeal based not on the message but on the communicator's attitude toward them. If they perceive the communicator as rude, arrogant, or disrespectful, they are likely to act accordingly.

Words have two meanings, denotative (the dictionary definition) and connotative (the shades of meanings that we attach to words through our life experience). What often has the most impact on the audience are the thoughts and emotions that people associate with certain words.

Richard Weaver, in *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, said the language has what he called "ultimate terms." These are words that trigger an automatic emotional response in people, positive or negative, because the words have acquired a meaning beyond the dictionary definition. Weaver termed them "god words" and "devil words." Such words as *democracy, courage, leader*, almost always are viewed as positive and fall under the category of "god words." *Racist, radical, slacker*, and *obese* are "devil words." By using words that have positive connotations, you often can steer the audience toward the conclusion you want people to reach. That is why President Bush repeatedly referred to soldiers as *patriots* or *freedom fighters.*

Tone cont.

Further evidence is seen in the way pollsters frame their questions. When Frank Luntz, a well-known Republican pollster, asked people if they would support raising taxes *for law enforcement*, 51 percent said yes. When he rephrased the question and asked another group if it would support higher taxes *to halt the rising crime rate*, 68 percent said yes.

Only 7 percent of respondents said the government spends too much on *assistance for the poor*, but when people were asked if too much is spent on *welfare*, 42 percent said yes. *Rising crime* and *welfare* are "hot button" words that Weaver would call "devil words"; they trigger an emotional response.

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Ken O'Quinn

Through his Writing With Clarity workshops, writing coach Ken O'Quinn has helped thousands of business professionals worldwide to express their ideas and tell their stories in ways that capture attention and keep readers engaged.

Corporate communicators, business professionals, and executives at such companies as Chevron, Visa, Oracle, John Deere, Raytheon, Burson-Marsteller, and Fleishman Hillard have turned to Writing With Clarity for the techniques of well-crafted communication.

Ken is the author of Perfect Phrases for Business Letters, published by McGraw-Hill, which provides the right words and phrases that are appropriate for particular situations.

Drawing on his extensive research, his writing and editing experience, and his compassion for writers, he provides a range of business professionals with important techniques and with the encouragement to write with confidence.

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